

The establishment of Black History Month signified an important step in our nation's willingness to tell a more truthful and comprehensive version of U.S. history. For centuries, people of African descent were systematically misrepresented in history, and their contributions to the arts, sciences, humanities, military, and politics were all too often downplayed, denied and ignored.

This perpetuated a skewed portrait of our nation's past and present. People of African descent in the U.S. played crucial roles in some of the most famous events in American history. York, a slave who was owned by the Clark family was a valuable member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and had superior skills in hunting, field medicine and scouting. Matthew Henson, a black American, was one of the first people to reach the North Pole. Much like the accomplishments of those before him, Barack Obama shattered yet another significant racial barrier in public service by becoming the first African-American President of the United States.

Changes in discriminatory laws and statutes have increased economic, career, and educational opportunities for people of African descent in the United States. However, dramatic health, wealth, and wage disparities continue to exist between blacks and their white counterparts. Although the recent economic downturn is having devastating effects on individuals from all backgrounds, African-Americans have been hit particularly hard. The wealth gap and unemployment levels between blacks and whites have widened over the past ten years. In fact, blacks earn 62 cents for every dollar of white income, and the January 2010 unemployment rate for blacks was 16.8% while the unemployment rate for whites was 8.7 %.

Disparities in health are also troubling. It is appropriate that National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day occurs during Black History Month. Although African-Americans comprise roughly 13% of the U.S. population, they account for nearly half of all HIV/AIDS infections. And, blacks generally have higher rates of premature births, black women have higher mortality rates from breast cancer, and blacks suffer disproportionately from chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease.

History reminds us of our nation's past, and provides us with the opportunity to build a better and brighter future. Black history month introduced a concept to the general public that has become a familiar phrase: "Black history is American history." Black History Month allows us to celebrate the contributions and progress that African-Americans have made, and develop solutions that will combat persistent inequalities that will result in stronger communities and a stronger nation.

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